

Understanding public attitudes to aid and development

Alex Glennie, IPPR

Will Straw, IPPR

Leni Wild, ODI



About the authors

Alex Glennie is a Research Fellow at IPPR.

Will Straw is Associate Director for Globalisation and Climate Change at IPPR.

Leni Wild is a Research Fellow at ODI.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank a number of individuals for their contributions to this research.

Particular thanks are owed to Martin Kirk and Santanu Chakrabarti at Oxfam for their invaluable input throughout all stages of the project, and to Martin Hall and Jeff Steer for their tireless organisational support.

We would also like to thank Gill Ereaut, Veronika Koller and Zsofia Demjen at Linguistic Landscapes for their participation in the design and organisation of the deliberative workshops, and for their analysis of the discourse that resulted. We have drawn heavily on their insights and innovative methodological techniques in drafting this final report, and believe the research is stronger for it (see Linguistic Landscapes 2012).

At IPPR, thanks to Nick Pearce, Sarah Mulley and Richard Darlington, and at ODI, thanks to Alison Evans and Marta Foresti, for their invaluable insights and drafting comments on the report. Thanks also to Myriam Cherti at IPPR for leading on the design and facilitation of the deliberative workshops.

Finally, we would like to thank all the individuals who attended the deliberative workshops in London, Newcastle, Edinburgh and Evesham and shared their views with us.

This research has been made possible as a result of the generous support of the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) Global Development Advocacy Fund, with additional support from Save the Children, Christian Aid, CAFOD, ActionAid and Oxfam. The views and conclusions expressed within this report are those of the authors alone.



Abbreviations

COI	Central Office of Information
DFID	Department for International Development
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNI	Gross National Income
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IPPR	Institute for Public Policy Research
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NHS	National Health Service
ODA	Official Development Assistance
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
ONS	Office of National Statistics
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States



Executive summary

In 2012, the UK remains one of the world's strongest advocates for the international development agenda. The most recent figures show the UK is the world's third largest provider of official development assistance (ODA) in absolute terms, and ranks sixth in terms of its ODA spending as a proportion of gross national income (GNI). Cross-party consensus on support for global development issues has protected the ODA budget in recent years, and the Coalition government remains committed in principle, if not yet in law, to meeting the international target of spending 0.7% of GNI on ODA by 2013. Meanwhile, the UK public has enthusiastically supported major campaigns to address global poverty such as Live Aid and Make Poverty History in recent decades, gives substantial amounts to development charities and has responded generously to one-off appeals for disaster relief such as for the 2004 Asian tsunami.

This broad support for UK development efforts cannot be taken for granted, however. The financial crisis and ensuing spending cuts have had a clear impact on public opinion, with recent polls showing that slim majorities now favour a reduction in UK aid spending. There is evidence of growing scepticism about the effectiveness of UK aid programmes (and, indeed, of aid in general), with calls to refocus the development debate on the quality of results rather than the quantity of money spent.

These trends in public opinion are in line with the findings of a new research project into public attitudes to development and aid, a joint endeavour of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). Together, we conducted four deliberative workshops in locations around the UK, inviting members of the public to take part in a three-hour discussion on a range of aid and development topics. Each of the discussions was analysed for both the content of what was said and the language individuals chose to use. This has given us a richer understanding of why people hold the views they do than is normally available from opinion polls or focus groups.

Our analysis suggests that **those who represent the middle ground of UK public opinion generally have a 'two-dimensional' understanding of aid and development** – they (unsurprisingly) lack understanding of the complex realities in developing countries and tend to focus on the role of governments and individuals in rich countries in helping poor people in developing countries, whom they often perceive as having

little control over their own lives. These views tend to be driven by moral values and opinions (rather than by self-interest). This supports the UK's commitments to issues of fairness and doing the right thing. But the way moral arguments are made also matters – sometimes, they have created a sense that 'we' are different from, and superior, to 'them' in ways that are counterproductive. This highlights the importance of framing and language choices in how arguments are presented.

Our findings indicate that **the public may be becoming less supportive of maintaining, let alone increasing, current levels of UK spending on aid**, even when people are told how much is currently spent. This appears to be linked partly to the impact of the financial crisis and current austerity measures, with many individuals in our workshops stating that the principle that 'charity should begin at home' is even more important at a time of economic hardship. It is also connected to increased concerns about waste and inefficiency in the delivery of aid, a finding previous opinion polling supports. But something polling and surveys have not highlighted to date is the extent to which some of the communications and fundraising images NGOs and governments use may have contributed to public scepticism – the repeated use of images that show people living in desperate need has created an impression that very little has changed over the past few decades.

Encouragingly, the discussions across all the deliberative workshops conducted for this project revealed **considerable appetite for greater understanding of development and for more complex stories of how change and progress happens**. Instead of a simple reassurance that 'aid works', people would like to hear about *how* and *why* it works, why it doesn't always work and the reasons aid alone cannot achieve development targets. Process and progress stories will both be core to winning sustainable public support for aid and development in the future.

Moreover, while there is some scepticism of aid, **development is generally viewed as a positive** and long-term effort to improve living standards, education and governance in developing countries. It is also seen as something that individuals in developing countries can participate in, as opposed to aid, which is seen less positively and is regarded primarily as a transfer of resources from rich to poor countries.

We found more **diverse views about who should be responsible for development than is often assumed**. Many of the ‘usual suspects’ were mentioned in discussions of responsibility, including governments in developing countries, rich governments like the UK, international institutions like the UN and the World Bank and international NGOs. Nonetheless, in a number of our workshops, members of the public felt that multinational companies and ‘big business’ had significant responsibilities in terms of addressing development challenges too.

Our research suggests that UK public opinion should not be treated as homogenous, or as a fixed ‘obstacle’ to be worked around. People hold different views on these issues, and their attitudes can be shaped and changed by the ways governments, NGOs and other actors communicate and debate issues. Public opinion should not be treated either as wholly negative or as ill informed. For example, high levels of concern about poverty and public generosity to development charities speak well of the UK public’s engagement with these issues. Meanwhile, people’s concerns about wastage and corruption may be exaggerated, but they are not baseless and deserve to be taken seriously, particularly at a time when public spending is being squeezed across the board.

The year ahead offers a critical opportunity to reframe the UK debate on development and aid. In 2013, the UK will hold the Presidency of the G8, and David Cameron will co-chair a new UN committee established to consider what should follow the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These are openings for a more honest and constructive conversation with the UK public, but this will require both government and NGOs to rethink their current communication strategies.

Building on our findings, we make the following recommendations to the UK development community:

1. **NGOs and government should ensure they understand the impact their development messages and campaigns have on the wider public.** For example, greater care should be taken to ensure messages reinforce moral commitments to what is right and fair rather than relying on more self-interested messages. Fundraising appeals and other campaign communications should be designed so they do not risk further undermining public support for aid in the medium to long term.
2. **Campaigns should do more to communicate how change can and does happen in developing countries,** including the role aid can play in catalysing or facilitating this change. Process and progress stories about how development actually happens may be more effective communication tools than campaigns focused straightforwardly on either inputs (such as pounds spent) or outputs (such as children educated). People want to hear how long funding will be provided for and, crucially, when it will cease to be needed.
3. **Campaigns and communication strategies could do more to link debates about ‘responsible capitalism’ to the challenges facing developing countries.** This might include calls for greater regulation or taxation of major international companies operating in these countries, among others.
4. **Greater public engagement – through deliberative events and consultation exercises – could generate productive debates** about the UK’s international development objectives and priorities, as well as increased public support for aid and development.

The cross-party consensus on the expansion of aid spending in recent years, supported by much of the NGO community, has developed without broad public support or a communications strategy to effectively engage people in debates on how and why the UK should support development processes. Instead, communications strategies have more often been used to maximise short-term support for specific campaigns or funding appeals, without due consideration of the longer-term impact. A change of approach is necessary if the UK government and NGOs want to retain public support for aid and development and ensure new campaigns to address issues around food and global hunger do not backfire in the medium to long term. Getting the message right will be critical to the UK’s continued leadership in this area.

1: Introduction

Despite considerable interest in public opinion on international development and aid, and the fact that the UK has some of the most sustained polling in comparison with other developed countries, there has been limited (publicly available) qualitative research into UK public attitudes on these issues in recent years.

The Department for International Development (DFID) conducted regular opinion polls on public attitudes to international development between 1999 and 2010, although it has not published any since the election of the Coalition government. More recently, the UK Public Opinion Monitor, hosted by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), has begun a dedicated panel poll, complemented by *ad hoc* or one-off studies, including recent polls by Chatham House/Ipsos MORI and YouGov. Taken together, these are starting to provide some valuable insights into general trends on attitudes towards issues relating to development and aid.

However, the picture they present is only a partial one. While they give a sense of *what* the public think about various aspects of aid and international development debates, there is very little reliable understanding or theory on *why* people hold the views they do, and little lesson learning to date in terms of how different communication approaches might reinforce, maintain or change public attitudes in this area.

What evidence there is suggests the British public understands the causes of and responses to global poverty little differently now than was the case in 1985. The ‘Live Aid’ view of the world – whereby charity and aid are given to poorer countries or people by richer ones, often in response to natural disasters, emergencies or human suffering – remains dominant. Public support to these campaigns and causes has generated significant levels of funding for international aid and development, from both individual charitable donations and UK government spending. It has also helped to build strong cross-party consensus on the value of the UK taking a leading international role on development issues.

However, at a time of fiscal austerity and public spending cuts, it is unclear whether this ‘broad but shallow’ public support for spending on development and aid is sufficient, or can even be maintained, with signs that support is dropping in some areas (Chatham House/YouGov, 2011). There have been calls

for greater transparency, value for money and accountability in aid spending to address these signs of public concern. This is undoubtedly part of the answer. But questions are also being asked about whether the relatively simple public communications story of ‘aid saving lives’ remains sufficient or accurate, given the wealth of new evidence on the complexity of change processes in developing countries and the multiple drivers of progress.

In light of this, the challenges of communicating development and aid issues to the public are likely to increase. Policymakers and development campaigners alike therefore have a real interest in better understanding attitudes in this area and exploring new ways of communicating with the public.

To help address this, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) have worked together to provide up-to-date qualitative analysis of public attitudes on aid and development, and to develop recommendations and approaches for more informed public communications and engagement in this area.

The key research questions for this study were:

- How do people understand issues relating to international development and international aid? Do they perceive a difference between them?
- Why do people hold the attitudes they do on international development and aid?
- What are the main influences on these attitudes?
- How do current public messages and communications from government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other development actors affect public opinion?

Methodology

The findings of this project are drawn primarily from a series of deliberative workshops held with members of the British public. These workshops were not designed to produce a definitive account of what the public thinks. Neither were they organised to test out particular policy ideas. Instead, they offered a valuable opportunity to hold in-depth conversations with members of the public and to see how people respond to new information and arguments.

These workshops were conducted in four UK locations (London, Newcastle, Edinburgh and Evesham) during February and March 2012, with a total of 77 participants. Participant recruitment was designed to ensure a balanced number of men and women and a mix of ages and ethnic and professional backgrounds. We also used a screening survey (see Annex 1) to ensure participants reflected the ‘middle ground’ of public attitudes towards development and aid, rather than those who were either strongly for or against aid and development, since these individuals are most likely to be open to the presentation of new and different messages. A breakdown of the results of this screening is in Annex 2.

Each session lasted around three hours and involved open-ended discussions about various aspects of international development and aid. A range of visual, oral and written prompts was used to stimulate (but not direct) discussions within the whole group and in smaller breakout groups. One particular aim was to identify how this information influenced the nature of the discussion, and to track any shifts in attitudes that occurred over the course of the workshop.

After the workshops, IPPR and ODI conducted content analysis of the transcripts. This was complemented with discourse analysis by Linguistic Landscapes, a language research consultancy, which assessed the data using sociolinguistics and other approaches to discourse, including a ‘frames’ perspective (see Darnton and Kirk, 2011) in order to draw out the values and perspectives underlying participants’ stated views. Analysis looked for common themes and key differences between and within the workshops. We triangulated our findings, through comparisons and contrasts with opinion poll data and other qualitative studies.

Although the small number of workshops and the methodology used mean our findings were never intended to be fully representative, this project aims to make a fresh contribution to an ongoing debate, and will hopefully stimulate further work in this area.

Structure of the report

The next section provides a brief overview of the context of the project, highlighting recent data from opinion polls and surveys on attitudes to international development and aid. Section 3 then summarises our analysis of the discussions held in the workshops and the key findings that emerged from them. The concluding Section 4 discusses what these findings mean for communication of these issues, focusing particularly on recommendations for the major development NGOs, but also touching on implications for the UK government and other actors.

2: Public opinion on development and aid in the UK

Support for aid has often been characterised as ‘broad but shallow’, with Smillie (1999) describing it as ‘a mile wide and an inch deep’. In September 2010, an opinion poll found that a majority (62%) of respondents thought it was morally right to support developing countries, but a similar proportion thought aid budgets should be cut to help reduce the fiscal deficit (Henson and Lindstrom, 2011).

Support for reducing levels of aid seems to reflect the wider economic climate. In a context of significant cuts to public spending, the public appears to have broadly opposed the decision to ring-fence the aid budget. A Chatham House/YouGov poll (2011) found that only 27% believed aid contributed to poverty reduction and protected the UK’s long-term security, and should therefore be safeguarded from cuts (compared with 53% of opinion formers in business, Whitehall, the media and the voluntary sector who were also surveyed). In a June 2010 survey by Harris Interactive, 64% of respondents considered that aid to developing countries should bear the biggest part of cuts in government spending (Financial Times/Harris, 2010).

This said, it is important to remember that most members of the public think the total aid budget is far higher than it actually is (with some estimating that it is as much as 18% of government spending) (ActionAid, 2006). This is supported by the results of the screening questionnaire used to recruit workshop participants for this project, with fewer than 9% of respondents estimating that spending on aid was less than 1% of gross national income (GNI) (the actual figure was 0.57% in 2011). By comparison, 47% estimated it between 1% and 5% of spending, 33% thought it was between 5% and 10% and 11% thought it exceeded 10% of the UK’s GNI (ibid.).

However, misinformation is not the only explanatory factor in declining support for aid. For example, a 2012 poll by the UK Public Opinion Monitor found that more than 65% of respondents were in favour of cutting the aid budget by a lot or a little, even after being informed about the actual amount of money spent per person in the UK (Henson and Lindstrom, 2012). Only 7% thought the budget should be increased a little or a lot in the next one to two years, although just over 15% thought it should be increased over the next five to ten years (presumably once the economic recovery has occurred).

In general, the UK public is thought to know relatively little about development and/or aid (Darnton, 2009; Henson et al., 2010). DFID surveys suggest relatively low levels of awareness of development institutions (including of DFID itself) or their activities, and also of development initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (COI, 2009). Nonetheless, there are continued public fears that aid is wasted (around 57% of the public thought that ‘much development assistance is wasted’, Chatham House/YouGov, 2011).

Some opinion polls also point to discernible differences between attitudes to aid and attitudes to international development. While DFID’s annual tracking surveys suggest a gradual decline in support for increased government spending on aid (from 49% in September 2008 to 35% in February 2010), there is continued concern regarding poverty and development (with 73% remaining concerned about global poverty) (COI, 2010). Surveys have also found that people believe international charities, the UN and the governments of rich countries (in that order) have made the most contribution to reducing poverty in developing countries (ONS, 2005).

Why does the public hold the views it does on aid and development?

Opinion polls do not provide detailed information on why people hold the attitudes they do. However, they offer some insights into why parts of the population may be more or less in favour of supporting development or spending on aid. Interestingly, different polls suggest different reasons, reflecting both the complex nature of public attitudes (which may not always be consistent) and the importance of the way questions are asked.

DFID’s tracking surveys and a number of previous qualitative studies (Darnton, 2009; Henson et al., 2010) suggest the UK public often sees the causes of poverty in poor countries as being internal to developing countries, with corruption often considered the main one (over 50% of respondents to DFID’s tracking survey in both September 2009 and February 2010 gave this as a response). The only significant causal factor mentioned in these surveys that was considered external to developing countries was international debt, and only a small minority raised this (around 10%).

While this analysis of the causes of poverty might be expected to undermine support for aid, a 2011 poll found that perceptions of corruption had no significant influence on support for aid spending (Henson and Lindstrom, 2011). Instead, perceptions that aid is wasted seem to have a much more significant – and negative – effect.

IDS polling suggests the dominant drivers of public support for aid ‘is the interplay between the moral obligations to help the poor in developing countries and prioritisation of the poor “at home”’ (Henson and Lindstrom, 2011). On the one hand, the authors find evidence of a recognised sense of moral duty; on the other, there is a common view that priority should be given to poverty alleviation at home rather than in other parts of the world.

Other contrasting views apparent from polling revolve around the links made between the UK’s aid and development support and its own interests. The 2011 Chatham House/You Gov poll found that 57% of those surveyed thought ‘development assistance was wasted and did little or nothing to promote British interests and should therefore be radically reduced’ (although the direct causal link made in this phrasing did not allow respondents to give a more nuanced response). Yet more recent polling in 2012, also by YouGov, found that arguments directly appealing to self-interest did not work as well as moral ones, as ‘people think aid should be altruistic’ (YouGov, 2012).

These varied polling results make it difficult to discern ‘what lies beneath’ public attitudes – and reinforce the need to look critically at the design of polls themselves.

Limitations of opinion polls

A number of limitations have been highlighted with regard to opinion polls on attitudes to aid and international development. For example, while surveys continue to highlight generally low levels of knowledge, this is rarely taken into account in survey design and analysis; questions often ask whether aid spending should increase or decrease but do not account for what people think governments currently spend (Hudson and VanHeerde-Hudson, 2009). Similarly, surveys tend to conflate development and aid, but people’s views often differ. For instance, DFID surveys consistently show that people remain ‘very concerned’ about levels of poverty in poor countries but less than half agree that spending on aid should increase (TNS, 2008).

In addition, polls fail to capture the influence of people’s underlying values and beliefs on their views towards development and aid issues (which are crucial, in light of the IDS finding about the trade-offs people make between helping poor people overseas versus poor people in the UK), and frequently ‘neglect people’s views on policy issues going beyond aid, for instance trade, debt and immigration policy’ (Czaplinska, 2007).

Finally, the way questions are asked can shape the responses received significantly. For example, opinion polls often present respondents with a statement with which to agree or disagree, which can force them to give a response that may not entirely reflect their views. Research has also shown that framing the same question in slightly different ways can produce very different responses (see Iarossi, 2006). This highlights the importance of the language used in research on public attitudes – a point to which we return later in this report.

These were some of the gaps we aimed to address through qualitative research methods designed to dig deeper into public attitudes. Deliberative workshops of the kind we conducted cannot produce representative data on what the whole population thinks about development and aid. However, they do allow for a richer discussion that goes beyond some of the headline figures opinion polling generates.

The next section gives an overview of the key findings from the deliberative workshops, highlighting what people think and why they hold these views. It also offers some insights into the kinds of information and arguments that have the potential to influence the attitudes of those who represent the ‘middle ground’ of public opinion and are neither strongly for nor against development and aid.

3: Key findings

The findings of our research are challenging for policymakers and those working in the development community. They suggest the public generally has a ‘two-dimensional’ understanding of aid and development, which holds governments and individuals in rich countries responsible for assisting passive and helpless people in developing countries. These views are often underpinned by stereotypical attitudes towards poverty, or particular countries, and a strong moral sense that at times appears close to superiority and contrasts between ‘us’ and ‘them’, which can work to undermine a sense of shared empathy. We would suggest, though, that this stems at least in part from the absence from the public discourse of a more subtle or nuanced set of ways to make sense of and talk about the situation and the issues.

While the UK public continues to donate generously to one-off appeals, our findings support recent opinion polls showing a decline in support for increased aid spending (and some calls to reduce this spending). This seems to be linked partly to the impact of the financial crisis and public spending cuts, but also stems from concerns about waste and inefficiency in the delivery of aid. These may have been exacerbated by the fundraising and communication strategies of some NGOs and government. Most participants stated that the images they saw on television made them feel like little progress had been made on the development agenda over the past few decades, which in turn had made them less confident in the effectiveness of aid.

In relation to plans for new NGO campaigning around hunger in 2013, it appears there is poor understanding of how food, hunger and poverty issues intersect in developing countries, and little awareness of what can be done at the global level to address hunger and malnutrition. However, discussions of food and hunger did tap into debates about fairness, suggesting a potential direction for campaign and communication strategies on this issue.

Most encouragingly, the workshop discussions revealed that many people were aware of their lack of understanding on issues relating to development and aid, that they wanted to hear more complex stories of change and progress and that they were interested in gaining a better understanding of how development actually happens.

Participants had relatively narrow understandings of issues of development and aid

Each workshop started with a brainstorming session, prompted by a series of images relating to international development and aid. The range of images employed mixed those commonly used in campaigning and fundraising with some less conventional imagery. This was done to see whether and how different types of images trigger different types of responses.

When asked about these images, participants put forward a range of views and associations. Taken together, these suggested a relatively basic view of development and aid issues.

In part, this reflects the common association with humanitarian crises, something that is supported by a wide range of polling data (McDonnell et al., 2002). Many of the words and ideas used to describe development and those in developing countries in the brainstorming session were therefore associated predominantly with concepts of need and the lack of some vital resources or conditions, as Figure 1 shows.

When these ideas or words were expanded on, participants often focused on what those in developing countries did not have, such as access to food, clean water, education or the ability to make informed choices about their lives.

media/charities only
we take things
water

capitalism

infrastructure
uncivilised

happier
food

This was contrasted with what ‘we’ (in the UK or other rich countries) possess, with many participants stating that the images made them grateful for what they had and aware of the fact that they took a lot for granted.

We take things for granted, we can walk out and buy what we want to, they’ve not got money, they’ve not got jobs and, don’t get me wrong, there’s poverty here too but not like that

– Edinburgh 3

As highlighted by the discourse analysis carried out by Linguistic Landscapes, there was a clear separation between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in the language people chose to discuss these issues. Views of those in developing countries (often characterised as ‘the poor’) were commonly undifferentiated, with little acknowledgement of differences between groups or societies. There were few references to indigenous knowledge and little awareness of local markets for trade or growth patterns.

Discourse analysis also revealed that ‘they’ were consistently constructed as passive actors, with suggestions that ‘they are ignorant in so many ways compared with us’ (in terms of education, jobs, nutrition and so on). This reinforced the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dynamics, with ‘education’ (from us to them) a constant theme (indicated by use of the ‘teach a man to fish and you feed him for life’ cliché by some participants). Specifically, education was presented as filling an empty space – those in poorer countries were spoken about as if they were a blank slate, ready to be filled with knowledge, and as if this itself would be their route to better living conditions.

I think if we go over there and educate them to farm or jobs, trades, doctors, nurses, I think if the money was used in that way, I think it would be a lot more beneficial

– Evesham 4

Discourse analysis revealed a consistent pattern in relation to the poor of the world – ‘they’ tend just to ‘need’. For ‘us’, though, the picture is more complicated, with participants positioning a collective ‘we’ as having obligations to help reduce global poverty, but also rejecting externally imposed obligations, and, interestingly, generally delegating responsibility for acting to some other group.

In general, there was limited understanding of what life is like in developing countries, with some participants acknowledging this explicitly and observing that they themselves needed educating. However, this did not prevent many from voicing strong opinions about what ‘they’ (poor people) were like and what they needed.

I know they don’t need very much to be happy or be content

– Evesham 5

Taken together, this contributed to what Linguistic Landscapes termed a ‘two dimensional discourse’ around development and aid issues. This was characterised by firm, categorical statements that did not reflect the detail of people’s lives and experiences, and often relied on ‘them versus us’ comparisons. This two-dimensional understanding is not unique to the international development debate, and is evident in other policy areas.

Worryingly, this ‘us versus them’ understanding often undermined a sense of empathy. As Linguistic Landscapes found, while parallels were drawn – ‘we’ have problems just as ‘they’ do – there was also a feeling on the part of participants across the workshops that, while ‘we’ are rich, ‘they’ may be rich in other ways (e.g. in terms of community ties, time). The overall effect of this, they argued, was to make a case *against* support for aid and development. This flags the need to understand what drives these frames of thinking, and how they might be changed.

Participants differentiated between international development and aid

Although the words ‘development’ and ‘aid’ are sometimes used interchangeably in opinion polling, it was apparent in all the workshops that people do make distinctions between the two.

In general, development, as understood by participants, had a broader definition, linked to longer-term efforts to improve education, infrastructure and governance, for example, and signs of progress. Workshop discussions seemed to support opinion poll findings that people are generally in favour of development processes.

You want people building schools, building toilets, putting wells in, education, etc. so I'm quite interested in what's developed from that, what's been learned and what can be built upon

– Edinburgh 6

Just looking at all of the pictures made me think of humanity and how caring we can be and the fact that there are solutions to the world's problems and this all looks like things that can be done and it's like you can make progress and you need to make progress, for the future of the planet

– Evesham 7

There was some recognition of the fact that development takes place over different timeframes, with participants reflecting on the importance of both providing support for immediate needs but also engagement with longer-term development processes.

If they're educated, we give them help that's long term, not just go in and give them some water and rice to get them by for the next three months, I mean long-term help

– Newcastle 8

So it's got to be a short-term mini programme not to let them sort of go without the basic and the longer term programme, to set up something so that they can slowly start to take their own control because it must be difficult for them, okay it's nice to receive aid but they are not in control of their own lives, having to every single day to depend on someone else just to survive until tomorrow

– London 9

In some workshops, participants made spontaneous comments about how richer countries may in fact have contributed to underdevelopment. This point tended to be raised by those who had family links or who had travelled or worked in developing countries, and was particularly evident in the London workshop (perhaps reflecting the more diverse ethnic backgrounds and life experiences of participants in that group).

That whole thing about the gracious West giving a little bit to, rather than actually resolving the issues which are actually quite simple to resolve, what people need is infrastructure, possibility of growing their own food, the possibility of – there's plenty on this earth to be shared out – if economics allowed us to do it

– London 10

Capitalism isn't very good at sharing things out so some people are extremely wealthy whereas other people don't have the basics and it's not very fair

– London 11

[We've] got ourselves to blame most of the time because a lot of these people are still getting over slavery and we were the ones that exploited these countries and we're exploiting countries to this day

– Evesham 12

In contrast, ideas of aid were often linked to humanitarian assistance, and to the more two-dimensional understanding of the lives of those in developing countries, as discussed above. This distinction between development and aid is an important one. It supports some of the opinion poll data that suggest that, while UK citizens have a broadly favourable view of development processes, with some recognition that these can or should be led by poor countries and individuals themselves, they remain much more suspicious about the delivery and efficacy of aid.

In every workshop, questions were asked about what impact aid had had and where funds had gone, with a strong sense that there had been little substantive change over the past two decades. In this context, repeated references were made to the original Live Aid concerts, suggesting both the influence of these events but also potential challenges where they reinforce a sense that little changes.

This has been happening for years and years and years, so it's almost like a cycle and I think sometimes you get a bit cynical and think there are things being put in place, why are they going wrong? Why are they not changing things?

– Edinburgh 13

I was around when Live Aid shocked everybody and still the problem hasn't been sorted, we're giving to charities, doing our stuff and it's still happening

– Evesham 14

Band Aid, when they raised all that money, yes they started off doing things but it's keeping those things going and the money's got to keep coming in to keep them going

– Edinburgh 15

A number of explanations have been put forward to explain growing scepticism of aid. Some opinion poll data, for example, suggests many people see corruption as one of the main reasons aid has not done more to reduce global poverty (Darnton, 2009). Issues of corruption were raised across the deliberative workshops, with individuals commenting on the fact that aid's impact is limited where it does not reach intended beneficiaries and is instead misused.

However, concerns about waste and inefficiency on the part of aid providers seemed to be more prevalent, supporting some of the recent poll evidence gathered by IDS (see Henson and Lindstrom. 2011).

Participant 1: When I can see some real evidence, proper evidence that things are getting better, I might change my mind but there are so many charities now and you just think where is all that money going?

Participant 2: The problem is inflation of charities.

Participant 1: The tsunami, they got all the money out there, they haven't spent it all because they don't know what to spend it on

– conversation in London 16

Some participants explicitly asked about strategies to exit aid, and there was also some recognition that aid alone is unlikely to solve all development problems.

With all this aid or charity and donation ... we need to have some kind of projected view, how long is that going to go on? When will they become self-sufficient? Then you will get these people out of poverty, you cannot just keep on giving

– London 17

So I don't think aid's going to fix development, aid's going to keep people going but I think there has to be a political fight

– London 18

Taken together, while there was a strong sense of scepticism or questioning of aid (often linked to perceptions of waste), there was also support for development processes and an interest in understanding both how aid can eventually become obsolete and the range of solutions to development challenges.

Some public messages may erode long-term support for aid and development

The images and figures presented on international development in the workshops often triggered feelings of helplessness or hopelessness in the face of the scale of needs and development problems.

These 850 million hungry people every day ... I don't know, are we trying to push water uphill?

– Evesham 19

There were extensive discussions across all the workshops about whether aid was having any impact at all. Much of the scepticism workshop participants expressed towards aid seemed to be reinforced by some of the campaign or fundraising tactics and images used, with particular criticism directed towards methods used by large charities and campaign organisations. For instance, a number of participants expressed anger at the continued use of images of extreme poverty and hardship in developing countries, which triggered feelings of being manipulated. Indeed, across all the workshops, there were questions about whether these images were presenting the full reality of the situation in developing countries.

I think the exploitation even starts by these photos, they use the photos to exploit us to give the money for things that may not even really exist

– London 20

You kind of start to distrust, why should you give your hard earned money ... when you don't actually know that it's actually going to get there? And I feel ashamed that I feel like that, I know they need help and I try to give ... but ashamed that I feel ... suspicious, that they're maybe not going to get the money and it may be lining somebody else's pocket

– Edinburgh 21

You get the child on adverts looking miserable and they're all malnourished and they look miserable and the adverts show you the most saddest, miserable child you could ever have but that might not be the case

– Newcastle 22

Discourse analysis found evidence of distancing in the way that people talk about aid, and language patterns suggesting a generalised sense of guilt – perhaps at the heightened consciousness of participants' relative comfort and privilege. There were a few isolated comments about the specific issue of charitable giving, with one participant in Evesham suggesting that failures on the part of those delivering aid were not good excuses to stop giving to charity.

But it won't stop me giving to the charities because if the money's squandered then that's terrible but it's not my problem if you know what I'm saying, I think a lot of people, if they don't want to give, they'll say 'oh yeah but it doesn't go ... and it's taxed' and whatever and I think that's just an excuse for them not giving because it's like passing the buck a bit and saying 'I don't really want to give so I'll blame the governments or I'll blame the tax'

– Evesham 23

On the whole, images of poverty and hardship tended to reinforce simplistic understandings of the lives of those in developing countries and, over the long term, may undermine support for aid.

If you keep on seeing the same pictures, you're just going to keep on seeing the same image over and over, you're just going to turn away, some people turn away and don't want to see it again and again because if they just keep on seeing the same adverts on the telly with no improvement, you will be thinking 'where has all this money gone?'

– Edinburgh 24

However, across the workshops, there were also calls for a better understanding and a richer, fuller picture of people's lives in these countries. This is discussed further below, and suggests a need both to build greater personal connections through communication and to offer an accessible yet more complex understanding of what is happening in developing countries.

The thing is we're asked to give them money but we don't know why most of the time, we need educating, they do as well but we need educating, when the TV advert comes on it says simply 'they're dying, give us your money', no-one tells us why, how, well they give us the basics but there's a bigger picture to the basic isn't there?

– Newcastle 25

Strong moral views underpin attitudes on development and aid

A key finding from the workshops, supported by other qualitative and quantitative research on public attitudes to development and aid (see Henson and Lindstrom, 2012; YouGov, 2012) was that strong moral views underpin attitudes on aid and development. For instance, there was general recognition of the moral case for supporting those in developing countries.

Every child deserves a good healthy upbringing...every child deserves an education...even the most simplest things they deserve and obviously from what you see on the telly, they're not getting that and they are probably the most important thing in this'

– Edinburgh 26

We have everything we need so I believe we feel we need to give them what we've got as well, in order for them to survive

– Newcastle 27

These discussions often had paternalistic or benevolent overtones, reflecting a sense that those who are richer should help those who are poorer. This is something discourse analysis revealed as a 'moral order' framing (see Darnton and Kirk, 2011), with hierarchies of power (in this case Western above non-Western cultures) seen as natural and hence also moral.

If it's in Africa, you get the really rich people that are extremely rich but when you go to the poverty side of it, there's so much of it so it's down to the government, it's down to who controls it. In Britain they must be doing something right, we haven't got to that stage where we're so poor, we're not going through this

– London 28

I think the governments who control these countries, they're shameful, the way that they treat their own people

– Evesham 29

Our government controls the finances of the country pretty much other than the money coming in from abroad and stuff, but on a financial level, our government say how much is going and coming from the NHS [National Health Service], where the cuts are, where the money's going to be put back in ... but if you go to Africa or India ... the controllers of these countries ... are more concerned on developing themselves as opposed to helping the people

– Edinburgh 30

However, as discussed above, there was also some acknowledgement of historical injustices as contributing to poverty and underdevelopment, with a few participants linking this to discussions of why the UK and other rich countries should be giving aid. There was also strong evidence of the more positive (for development) ‘embodied mind’ frame, where emotions and moral values are as inherent to reasoning as rationality is. It was clear participants regarded this debate as essentially moral – even though ‘we have problems here too’ was part of the discussion, this was dwarfed by discussion in which gross inequity between nations and peoples was simply seen as ‘not right’.

I think we need to take a lot of money off a lot of rich people in the West and give it to the people in the Third World

– Evesham 31

Issues of fairness came up repeatedly, with numerous references across all workshops to unfair distributions of power and resources globally.

It’s the haves and have nots isn’t it?

– London 32

Well, we tend to take our lives for granted and we’ve got all the mod cons which we just take as par for the course but when you look at that and you see hands of grain and this sort of thing, it makes you think ‘oh bloody hell, we’re really well off compared with some parts of the world’

– Newcastle 33

We take things for granted, we can walk out ... we want to, they’ve not got money, they’ve not got jobs and don’t get me wrong, there’s poverty here too but not like that, I wouldn’t like to be in that, as I say we do take a lot of things for granted, just go to the bank and get money

– Edinburgh 34

It’s unfair because like someone said they were brought into this, they don’t deserve this at all

– Evesham 35

Issues of fairness and moral commitments were substantially more prevalent than self-interested arguments (e.g. those which link development to improved security or improved economic opportunities for the UK) in explaining participants’ support for aid and development. While International Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell has spoken about the need to focus on development policies ‘where there are win-wins for the UK’ (Mitchell, 2011), these views did not seem to be widely held by workshop participants.

Participant 1: It’s not just aid, it’s what they can they do for us in the future.

Participant 2: But that’s not why you help people, to help the poorest people, that’s what we should be doing?

– conversation in Newcastle 36

Support for development is tempered by a sense that we should prioritise poverty in the UK

The moral commitment to development many participants expressed was, however, mitigated by a sense that there is a need to prioritise addressing economic challenges in the UK.

While participants drew parallels between economic challenges at home and those in developing countries, notions of ‘charity beginning at home’ were expressed in all the workshops. These points were linked to the current economic situation in the UK, with suggestions that UK challenges be addressed before turning to international ones.

We have poverty in parts of our country, childhood poverty and different things, we had flooding going on a couple of years back, we dish out quite a lot of aid as a country but do we ever get anything back to our country?

– Newcastle 37

We’ve got issues here, like on the streets of London, there’s homeless people here going hungry

– Evesham 38

I’m not saying they’re giving too much but when I saw that we were second [in terms of levels of aid spending] and I was thinking of great countries, wealthy countries like China and places like that way down, I thought perhaps we should be about eighth or ninth and not second, we’re trying to

reduce our own deficit here so that we can lift people out of poverty in our own civilised country

– Newcastle 39

Linked to this, there was some discussion across the workshops (and particularly in Edinburgh and Newcastle) about which countries were most in need of development assistance and where cuts could be made. For example, a few individuals singled out India and suggested that a country with such large numbers of millionaires should not be the biggest recipient of UK aid, although there was also some recognition of the fact that India still has enormous development needs and experiences extremes of poverty as well as wealth.

These views may not be entirely a response to the current financial crisis. However, opinion polls do show a notable shift in attitudes over the past few years. While DFID surveys of public attitudes on international development in 2006 and 2007 found more than 50% of respondents thought the UK spent too little on overseas aid or achieving the MDGs, more recent opinion polls have highlighted a precipitous drop in support. For example, Chatham House/YouGov’s survey of public attitudes in 2011 found that only 7% of the general public thought the UK spent too little on aid, compared with 57% who thought too much was being spent.

As noted above, ActionAid (2006) found that people usually estimate the aid budget as being around 10% of the UK’s GNI; most of the participants recruited for our workshops thought it was somewhere between 5% and 10% (see Annex 2). The introduction of actual figures for UK government aid spending (and as a percentage of GNI) did prompt some participants to change their views.

Participant 1: 0.5% goes to overseas aid, is that all?

Moderator: Do you think it should be more?

Participant 1: I think it’s about right

Participant 2: A little more

Participant 3: Definitely more

– conversation in Evesham 40

Misinformation is not the only reason levels of support for increased aid spending appear to be falling; as IDS polling found, a majority still tend to support cuts in the aid budget even after being told how much is actually spent. Discussions in our workshops suggested there is still work to be done in terms of making sure people have a more informed view on how much aid money the UK spends and on what. We return to this point later.

There are some unexpected views on responsibilities for reducing poverty and underdevelopment

To probe attitudes on the actors seen as important in efforts to address poverty and underdevelopment, participants were split into two groups and asked to construct a pie chart that divided up relative shares of responsibility among different actors. Some groups found this challenging, but the exercise produced some interesting insights. Below is an amalgamated chart that brings together all of the different actors, divided roughly by the percentage of responsibility assigned to each actor.

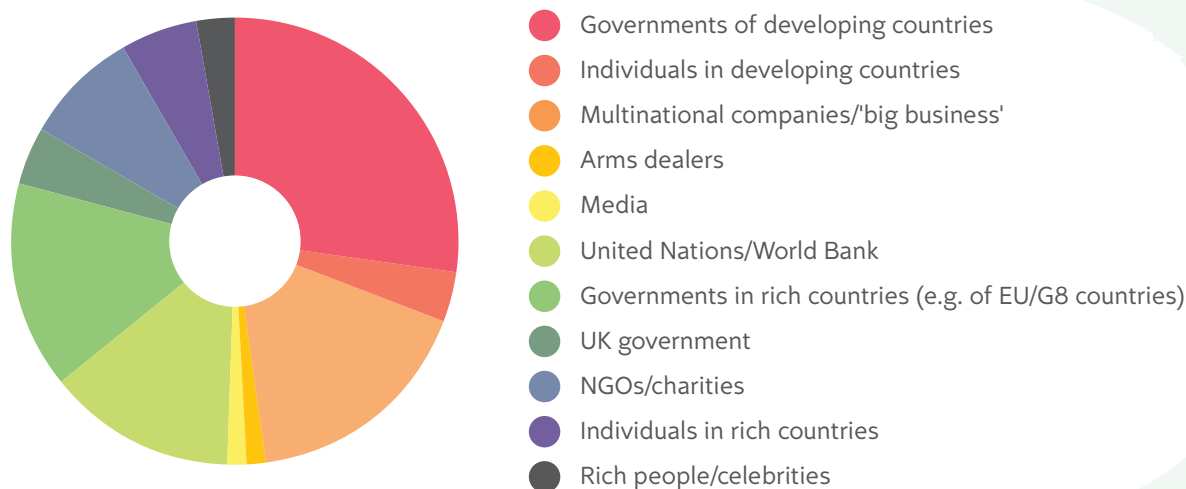
As expected, countries like the UK and the US and international organisations such as the UN, the World Bank and the European Union (EU) were seen as playing a major role in addressing these issues. In some workshops (London and Evesham particularly), participants felt this should be linked to historic legacies, including the effects of colonialism.

We developed ourselves by using these people and their resources so when you say it's their responsibility ... they can change it but it's our fault, it's our responsibility first I think

– London 41

Governments in developing countries were seen as having the most significant role to play here. For example, one of the Newcastle groups suggested 50% of the responsibility for reducing poverty should rest with these governments, 25% with people within developing countries themselves, 15% with rich or developed country governments and 10% with individuals and charities in rich countries.

Figure 3: General views on responsibility for addressing global poverty



Because I believe that their government is responsible for them, it starts and stops with them, their government is responsible for them, full stop, our government is responsible for us and we're responsible for ourselves and I do believe it's their problem. We can help them, that's a great thing but then governments should do more

– Newcastle 42

While poor individuals and communities were not seen as having much agency or obligation, their governments were seen as having both substantial responsibility for current problems and significant obligations in relation to solutions. The UK government, meanwhile, tended to be included within the collective 'we' used by participants: there was a split with respect to other countries between 'the poor' and their governments but no consistent split in the workshop conversations between 'us' and our government.

Perhaps surprisingly, in three out of four sessions (and particularly in London and Evesham) it was suggested that multinational companies or 'big business' should assume a large share of the responsibility for assisting in development.

I love the fact that Coca-Cola relocate in places like India where it's poor and they completely drain the reservoir, have the labour for a month or two and then just leave them with no water, no jobs or no anything, that needs to change

– Evesham 43

I think they should make them [big business] give a percentage of their gross to the poorer countries, the Third World countries, the government should make them, they should be taxed and a percentage should be sent abroad

– Evesham 44

These comments suggest that ideas about corporate responsibility and the responsibilities of multinationals may influence aspects of public attitudes on development and aid, a point which past opinion polls has not picked up. This may reflect some of the effects of the financial crisis and calls for more 'responsible capitalism' and larger contributions by business in the UK, although this was difficult to determine from the views gathered at the workshops.

There is a fairly poor understanding of issues of hunger, food and development

As a number of major charities and organisations in the UK are currently discussing future joint campaigns on issues of hunger, food and development, a key aim of the workshops was to probe people's understanding of these concepts. Across the four sessions, groups and individuals had some difficulty in conceptualising issues of food or hunger and their relationship to developing countries, including global supply chains for food. Participants often had a fairly narrow understanding of these issues, and commonly focused on issues such as 'fair trade' which require companies to pay sustainable prices to farmers, often linked to specific produce.

However, there was some awareness of connections between food, poverty and consumption in the UK and other rich countries, and recognition that, while there is sufficient food globally, it is not distributed equitably.

There's plenty on this earth to be shared out – if economics allowed us to do it

– London 45

I think the food problem does definitely stem more from this country than in the developing countries, the consumption and the greed in this country drives a lot of the poverty in these countries

– Edinburgh 46

I know a lot of these countries have to grow vegetables to export at the cost of feeding their own people because they get more money for growing crops that they can export to this country ... they really should be growing crops to feed the people in their own country and they don't

– Evesham 47

There were also a few isolated but interesting discussions about whether participants would accept reductions in their own living standards to improve the distribution of resources and food.

The problem is I think to have it across the world, the expectations of the West would have to be lowered and that's something that as a society ... we won't accept because it means we'd have to lower expectations to raise the their expectations

– Edinburgh 48

However, these discussions remained fairly limited and did not reflect the majority of opinion in any workshop.

In general, what emerged across the workshops is that discussions about food tend to be very local. Participants focused largely on what could be done in the UK, and in their own communities and homes, to reduce waste and tackle overconsumption.

I think that it's so easy for us to just go and get the fish and chips, a takeaway where what they've got to cook with, I expect there's no waste whatsoever and we just throw a hell of a lot away

– Evesham 49

There was less discussion on what should be done at the global level or in developing countries themselves. Interestingly, comments on this tended to be about making sure people had 'the same' or 'equal' amounts of food, rather than 'enough' food, possibly reflecting again the degree to which notions of fairness may underpin some of the moral commitment to development issues.

Everybody gets the same amount to survive.

A fair supply.

Like war rations.

...

If they ration it properly and they make sure it doesn't all go to the richest, then yes, the richest should have the same ration ... as the poor

– conversation in Newcastle 50

There is a strong appetite for stories of progress and process

One of the most significant findings from the workshops was the fact that there is considerable appetite for information and stories about how change happens and the processes by which development occurs. While in general participants had a fairly basic understanding of issues, they repeatedly argued for a more complex understanding or to know more about how change was possible.

I know they do show you bits and bobs and like after Sport Relief, maybe they could show you 'this is what's happening since we raised ...' because ... we've raised this much in one night, then they could say 'this money's gone here, there and it's bought this, that and whatever'

– Newcastle 51

For example, there's none of these pictures, well there's one that looked like it had a school but you're telling me these things have happened, why today then on that wall is there not another column somewhere of 'this is ongoing, however this is also happened'?

– Edinburgh 52

They never show you the success stories, they never say 'look at this hospital we've built, look at the wells we've made with the money that's come in', it's always like you say the sob story kind of thing and a lot of it that goes in there is good and a lot of good things but you never see the success, they never do an advert saying 'with your money we built this or we provided three donkeys', you never see that kind of stuff, I never see it

– Newcastle 53

Most people's understanding of development and aid is derived from media coverage of these issues, which tends to focus on the problems (such as natural disasters or conflict), the 'inputs' (such as the amount of money or resources devoted to reducing poverty) or the 'outputs' (such as the total number of children in school as the result of a particular policy or programme) without making much mention of the stages in between.

In particular, participants responded to the introduction of 'positive' stories of change happening at the country level (including an exercise which looked at progress achieved in Vietnam and Brazil).

Participant 1: But we're not being told this [in response to information that Ethiopia's economy grew by 8% last year], we're just being told to still keep passing your money through, we're not being told of the goals that they've achieved.

Participant 2: It's very encouraging

– conversation in Newcastle 54

A number of participants in each workshop expressed an interest in hearing more positive stories such as these. For example, in response to evidence that Vietnam and Brazil had cut levels of hunger dramatically in recent years, one participant in Edinburgh said:

I'd say I've never heard this information before, this is the first time, the impact it had on me was made me positive, it's given me hope and I'm starting to believe again, well I do believe that problems have solutions

– Edinburgh 55

This suggests that, for some people, comprehensible but rich stories of change and progress may help to shore up the fragile consensus around the value of aid.

As noted above, participants also requested greater understanding of what exit strategies for aid might look like – but driven less by the desire to reduce aid spending overall and more by a sense that dependency relationships can be detrimental.

[We need] to set up something so that they can slowly, slowly start to take their own control because it must be difficult for them, okay it's nice to receive aid but they are not in control of their own lives, having to every single day to depend on someone else just to survive until tomorrow

– London 56

The appetite for a more nuanced understanding of the processes of development and change is one of the most significant findings of this research, and suggests real opportunities for more open conversations with the UK public on timeframes, indicators for success and aid exit strategies for developing countries.

The dissatisfaction expressed with the more simple narratives often communicated today – and the relatively undeveloped understanding they have fostered – should provide food for thought for policymakers and those engaged in advocacy on these issues. Communicating complicated messages in accessible ways is challenging, but workshop discussions revealed a clear openness to this. In the next section, we discuss some of the ways in which the current conversation with the public could be changed and used to combat the apparent sense of frustration about the perceived lack of progress on the international development agenda.



4: Conclusions and recommendations

This research gives a richer sense of why the UK public holds the views it does on international development and aid. Deliberative workshops provide the opportunity to dig beneath the surface of public opinion and to understand better why people perceive these issues in different ways. This is particularly useful in areas of low ‘salience’ where issues are far down voters’ list of priorities. Deliberative workshops also give researchers the opportunity to see how groups of citizens interact with each other and their responses to new information. Using both content and discourse analysis allowed us to draw conclusions from what was said and the way those things were said.

The research suggests UK public opinion should not be treated as homogenous, or as a fixed ‘obstacle’ to be worked around. People’s views are diverse, and may be shaped and changed by the ways governments, NGOs and other actors communicate and debate issues. Public opinion should not be treated either as wholly negative or as ill informed. For example, high levels of concern about poverty, and public generosity to development charities, speak well of the UK public’s engagement with these issues. Meanwhile, people’s concerns about wastage and corruption may be exaggerated, but they are not baseless and deserve to be taken seriously, particularly at a time when public spending is being squeezed across the board.

The qualitative methodologies used in this project have their limitations. Nonetheless, we believe this research has added value by providing a deeper understanding of why people hold particular views on development and aid, and by suggesting how public communication could be changed to increase public support. Our recommendations are organised into four areas.

1. Understanding the impact of campaign messages

Workshop discussions suggest the development community shares some of the responsibility for the climate of public opinion it now faces. In general, many of the terms and concepts commonly used – even the term ‘international development’ itself – are not accessible to those outside the development sector. To date, too little attention has been paid to the language used and the communication styles that are prevalent. This research suggests a need to rethink current strategies, taking care over both the content and the style of language used.

Two forms of campaigning may have been particularly counterproductive. First, both our research and the latest findings from the field of cognitive science (see Chilton et al., 2012) show that **DFID’s recent attempts to reframe the case for development as being in Britain’s self-interest do not resonate as much as approaches that focus on what is ‘right’ or fair’.**

Issues of fairness and the moral commitment to supporting development came through overwhelmingly in participant discussions. Efforts to communicate aid and development issues may therefore be more effective where they relate to these values.

However, our discourse analysis reveals that moral concerns are often framed in fairly paternalistic ways, with a strong sense of ‘us’ (rich countries) helping ‘them’ (poorer countries). Sometimes, this is used as a reason to distance ‘us’ from ‘their’ problems, which in turn serves to undermine the case for aid.

So, while policymakers would do well to tap into moral commitments to development, this needs to be done sensitively and in ways that speak to issues of fairness or common empathy, rather than in ways that reinforce more negative constructs of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Second, **heart-string appeals may be effective fundraising devices but in the long term they tend to reinforce the sense that aid has not worked, as repeated appeals lead to questions over the effectiveness of development in general and aid in particular.**

In all four workshops, frustration was expressed about the apparent lack of progress implied by repetitive campaign messages since the time of the Live Aid concerts. Indeed, there was evidence of a growing scepticism of the use of imagery that depicts only starvation or those in desperate need. Participants suggested that, while they understood why charities used these pictures, it made them feel they were being manipulated or misled. These images may also reinforce perceptions of those in developing countries being passive and dependent, suggesting a need to carefully review campaign and communication strategies and their potential interpretations.

Linked to this scepticism about the impact of aid, workshop discussions suggested heightened concerns about the wisdom of increasing spending on international development at a time when the UK is in recession. While this prioritisation of problems at home is not new (polling has consistently shown that development ranks far below domestic issues in terms of importance to voters), it does suggest the current climate of fiscal austerity and public spending

cuts is influencing people. This is something that policymakers and campaigners need to confront head on. Instead of focusing on total levels of aid spending (including decisions to ring-fence the UK aid budget), campaigners should engage directly with these concerns about relative levels of spending on domestic and international priorities, emphasising the moral case for continued spending on aid even at times of economic hardship and the long-term nature of the development project.

This finding has implications for the different functions of development organisations too. There is a potential tension between the fundraising, campaigning and policy objectives of development organisations, based in part on very different timescales for action. Joint strategies that bring together these different functions from the beginning are needed now more than ever. The language those engaged in advocacy and fundraising use to communicate on these issues should be consistent and focused on enhancing and sustaining public support for the role of aid in development in the long term. For example, our discourse analysis highlights a lack of agency attributed to those living in the developing world. Moving forwards, there is a need to make some small but significant changes to the language used, to introduce and highlight people's agency and potential, to generate greater empathy and understanding over time.

NGOs and government should ensure they understand the impact their development messages and campaigns have on the wider public. For example, greater care should be taken to ensure messages reinforce moral commitments to what is right and fair rather than relying on more self-interested messages. Fundraising appeals and other campaign communications should be designed so they do not risk further undermining public support for aid in the medium to long term.

2. The importance of communicating progress and process

Our workshops showed a clear appetite for a richer understanding of how aid is used and how development takes place. Participants expressed frustration with their own lack of knowledge and questioned simplistic notions of how aid can achieve results. While there were some calls for information to be more accessible, the strongest requests were for a depth of understanding on how spending by UK taxpayers contributes to falling poverty, hunger and inequality in other parts of the world.

In general, this seems out of step with the current development communications focus on either inputs (such as ensuring aid spending reaches 0.7% of GNI) or outputs (such as simply listing the numbers of people educated or vaccinated as a result of aid). Participants at the deliberative workshops were most engaged when they heard progress stories and were intrigued to know more about how change had happened (even when this was complex). For example, hearing 'good news stories' about the progress of countries like Vietnam and Brazil in addressing hunger sparked a positive interest in many participants, leading to questions about how this had been achieved.

This suggests that, rather than being told simply that 'aid works', many people are more interested in hearing about how aid works (and why it doesn't always work) and being given stories rather than statistics to illustrate how change happens in developing countries, including specific examples of countries or regions where poverty, inequality or hunger have fallen. Getting this right is likely to be key to confronting negative perceptions of waste and inefficiency in relation to aid and countering the impression that 'nothing ever changes'.

Furthermore, there is a real appetite for understanding in which circumstances aid might no longer be necessary. This is driven not so much by a desire to reduce aid spending, but more by a sense that relationships founded on dependency are detrimental for both developing and richer countries. This opens up real opportunities for more open conversations with the UK public on timeframes for development, indicators of success, the challenges of getting aid to those who need it and strategies for reducing aid over time.

Campaigns should do more to communicate how change can and does happen in developing countries, including the role aid can play in catalysing or facilitating this change. Process and progress stories about how development actually happens may be more effective communication tools than campaigns focused straightforwardly on either inputs (such as pounds spent) or outputs (such as children educated). People want to hear how long funding will be provided for and, crucially, when it will cease to be needed.

3. New insights: perceptions of multinationals and big business

Workshop discussions suggested that the public believes the responsibility for supporting development lies with a range of actors. As backed up by the results of previous opinion polls, this

includes governments in developing countries, rich governments like the UK, international institutions like the UN and the World Bank and international NGOs.

But participants across a number of workshops also suggested that multinational companies and ‘big business’ had significant responsibilities in terms of addressing development challenges. This is not something recent opinion polling has highlighted to any significant degree.

Our workshops showed the private sector is seen to bear a greater responsibility for poverty reduction and development than NGOs and charities, and to be at least an equal partner to rich world governments and international institutions. There was a clear view that multinational companies need to give something back to countries and continents, where their role was perceived as largely extractive.

While DFID has recently championed the role of the private sector in development, with a focus on the opportunities and benefits of investment, participants were keen for information on their responsibilities too. In particular, participants raised the low levels of taxation paid by multinationals and concerns about the social impact of investments. This seems in line with the moral commitments and notions of fairness that seem to underpin people’s views in this area.

For campaigners and activists, this suggests that linking arguments for more ‘responsible capitalism’ in Europe to the development of poor countries could be a successful way to generate public interest and support.

Campaigns and communication strategies could do more to link debates about ‘responsible capitalism’ to the challenges facing developing countries. This might include calls for greater regulation or taxation of major international companies operating in these countries.

4. Opening up the conversation

The apparent disconnect between people’s moral sense that development is important and their concerns about increased spending on aid; and their interest in concrete examples of progress suggests development organisations (including DFID and NGOs) could do more to inform and consult the public on decisions on international development and aid priorities. While DFID has engaged in numerous consultative exercises, and has a strong track record in terms of bringing in opinion from outside, in general these exercises are targeted at other organisations and individuals within the development community, rather than at the general public. NGOs too have

tended to have fairly limited engagement with the UK public, often linked to specific fundraising appeals or campaigns rather than wider consultation or dialogue.

Public consultation on its own will not address all of the concerns people hold about international aid. Nor will it always succeed in generating a good understanding of complex development processes and challenges. However, proactive public engagement, done well, can significantly improve people’s understanding and buy-in, and can sometimes offer new ideas for policymakers to draw on. For example, in 2005 the Department of Health carried out an ambitious programme of public consultation and engagement activities in advance of publishing a White Paper. Both policymakers and members of the public engaged judged the consultation process to have had a significant influence on which issues were prioritised (Warburton, 2006). It is crucial that this kind of engagement is done on a regular rather than sporadic basis, since opinions can shift quickly in response to developments such as the financial crisis.

Development issues are, of course, different to domestic policy issues, because only a small minority of the UK public have relevant experience or expertise (although increased levels of migration and opportunities for travel are starting to change this). Engagement with the public also needs to be balanced against engagement with the beneficiaries of aid and in developing countries. However, UK taxpayers and donors have a legitimate interest in holding DFID/NGOs to account for aid spending, and a greater investment (of time, money and effort) in speaking and listening to the UK public and strengthening this accountability relationship would help politicians and policymakers to continue making the case for supporting development processes in poor countries.

DFID, and other development actors, should be unafraid to engage the public in the debate about results and impact, with respect to both aid in general and particular projects and programmes. Combined with the more nuanced stories of change described above, it should be possible to communicate a fair and balanced view of aid’s successes and challenges, which would help build accountability to the UK public.

More broadly, David Cameron’s recent appointment as co-chair of the new UN committee on the next round of global development targets that will replace the MDGs is a good opportunity for the government and NGOs to carry out a series of public consultations on the UK’s role in international development. Greater public engagement – through deliberative events and consultation exercises – could generate productive debates about the UK’s international development objectives and priorities, as well as increased public support for aid and development.

References

- ActionAid (2006) 'ActionAid Poll on Public Attitudes to Aid: Summary'. London: ActionAid.
- Chatham House/YouGov (2011) *British Attitudes towards the UK's International Priorities*. The Chatham House/YouGov Survey 2011. London: Chatham House.
- Chilton, P., Crompton, T., Kasser, T., Maio, G. and Nolan, A. (2012) 'Communicating Bigger-than-self Problems to Extrinsically-oriented Audiences'. Common Cause Research. <http://valuesandframes.org/download/reports/Extrinsically-oriented%20audiences.pdf>
- COI (Central Office of Information) (2009) 'Attitude Tracking Survey'. Research Report for DFID. London: COI.
- COI (Central Office of Information) (2010) 'Public Attitudes towards Development'. Report for COI. London: TNS/DFID.
- Collier, P. (2008) *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Czaplińska, A. (2007) 'Building Public Support for Development Cooperation'. Madrid: Instituto Complutense de Estudios Internacionales, University of Madrid.
- Darnton, A. (2009) 'The Public, DFID and Support for Development – A Rapid Review'. London: DFID.
- Darnton, A., with Kirk, M. (2011) 'Finding Frames: New Ways to Engage the UK Public in Global Poverty'. <http://findingframes.org/Finding%20Frames%20New%20ways%20to%20engage%20the%20UK%20public%20in%20global%20poverty%20Bond%202011.pdf>
- Financial Times/Harris (2010) 'Spending Cuts are Referred to Higher Taxes to Reduce Deficits in the US, Great Britain, France, Italy, Spain and Germany'. London: Harris Interactive.
- Henson, S. and Lindstrom, J. (2011) 'A Mile Wide and an Inch Deep? Understanding Support for Aid in the UK'. Brighton: IDS.
- Henson, S. and Lindstrom, J. (2012) 'Beginning to Understanding UK Public Support for Development'. Brighton: IDS.
- Henson, S., Lindstrom, J. and Haddad, L., with Mulmi, R. (2010) 'Public Perceptions of International Development and Support for Aid in the UK: Results of a Qualitative Enquiry'. Working Paper 353. Brighton: IDS.
- House of Commons (2009) 'Aid under Pressure: Support for Development Assistance in a Global Economic Downturn'. HC-179-I. London: International Development Committee, House of Commons.
- House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee (2012) 'The Economic Impact and Effectiveness of Development Aid'. London: House of Lords.
- Hudson, D. and VanHeerde-Hudson, J. (2012) 'A Mile Wide and an Inch Deep: Surveys of Public Attitudes towards Development Aid'. *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning* 4(1): 5-23.
- Iarossi, G. (2006) 'The Power of Survey Design: A User's Guide to Designing Surveys'. Washington, DC: IBRD/ World Bank.
- Linguistic Landscapes (2012) Engaging Minds: Listening to the Language, Discourse analysis of the workshops: a summary, UK: Linguistic Landscapes, www.linguisticlandscapes.co.uk
- McDonnell, I., Solignac Lecomte, H.B. and Wegimont, L. (2002) 'Public Opinion Research, Global Education and Development Co-operation Reform: In Search of a Virtuous Circle'. Working Paper 222. Paris: OECD Development Centre.
- Mitchell, A. (2011) 'Beyond Aid'. Speech to the Wellcome Trust, 11 November.
- ONS (Office for National Statistics) (2005) 'Public Attitudes towards Development: Knowledge and Attitudes Concerning Poverty in Developing Countries, 2005'. Report on research using the ONS Omnibus Survey for DFID. London: ONS.
- Smillie, I. (1999) 'Public Support and the Politics of Aid'. *Development* 42(3): 71–6.
- TNS (2008) 'Public Attitudes Towards Development'. Report for COI. London: TNS/DFID.
- VanHeerde-Hudson, J. and Hudson, D. (2010) "'The Righteous Considereth the Cause of the Poor"? Public Attitudes towards Poverty in Developing Countries'. *Political Studies* 58: 389–409.
- Warburton, D. (2006) 'Evaluation of Your Health, Your Care, Your Say'. Independent Report for the Department of Health.
- YouGov (2012) 'Understanding Public Perceptions of International Aid: Summary and Key Findings'. Presentation to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Annex 1: Screening questionnaire

A screening questionnaire was designed to assess participants' views, and recruiters were instructed to exclude respondents who scored less than 5 or more than 12 after combining scores for their answers to Questions 1-4. Interviewees were also asked (but not scored on) whether they had donated to a charity that worked in the developing world and, if they had done so, whether this was on a regular or occasional basis.

- 1. How concerned are you about the scale of global poverty?**
- | | |
|---------------------|-----|
| a) Very concerned | [4] |
| b) Fairly concerned | [3] |
| c) Not concerned | [0] |
- 2. What percentage of the UK's gross domestic product (GDP) do you think is currently spent on international aid and development?**
- | | |
|-----------------------|-----|
| a) Between 0% and 1% | [4] |
| b) Between 1% and 5% | [3] |
| c) Between 5% and 10% | [2] |
| d) Over 10% | [1] |
- 3. Do you think government spending on international aid and development ...**
- | | |
|-------------------------|-----|
| a) Should increase | [3] |
| b) Should stay the same | [2] |
| c) Should decrease | [1] |
| d) Should stop entirely | [0] |
- 4. How important is it for the UK government to maintain its commitment to international development?**
- | | |
|--------------------|-----|
| a) Very important | [4] |
| b) Quite important | [2] |
| c) Not important | [0] |
| d) Unsure | [1] |
- 5. Gender:** Female Male
- 6. Age group:**
- | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Under 18 | <input type="checkbox"/> 35-44 | <input type="checkbox"/> 65-79 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 18-24 | <input type="checkbox"/> 45-54 | <input type="checkbox"/> 80 years + |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 25-34 | <input type="checkbox"/> 55-64 | |
- 7a. Occupation:**
(If retired please ask for previous occupation)
- 7b. Could you tell me which of the following describes your working status most accurately?**
- | | |
|---|---|
| Working full time (30+ hours a week) | 1 |
| Working part time (less than 30 hours a week) | 2 |
| Self-employed | 3 |
| Unemployed and seeking work | 4 |
| Retired | 5 |
| Permanently sick or disabled | 6 |
| Other, e.g. looking after home or family | 7 |
- 8. Have you ever donated to a charity that works in the developing world, e.g. Oxfam or Christian Aid?**
- | |
|--------|
| a) Yes |
| b) No |
- 9. How often do you donate to this kind of charity?**
- | |
|---|
| a) On a regular basis (e.g. a monthly/annual direct debit) |
| b) In response to specific appeals (e.g. for disaster relief) |
- Total score:**

Annex 2: Results of screening survey

	London	Newcastle	Edinburgh	Evesham	Total
Total number of screened participants	20	20	20	19	79

1. How concerned are you about the scale of global poverty?

Very concerned	10	17	2	8	37 (41%)
Fairly concerned	10	3	18	11	42 (59%)
Not concerned	0	0	0	0	0

2. What percentage of the UK's GDP do you think is currently spent on international aid and development?

Between 0% and 1%	1	1	1	4	7 (9%)
Between 1% and 5%	8	9	13	7	37 (47%)
Between 5% and 10%	7	9	4	6	26 (33%)
Over 10%	4	1	2	2	9 (11%)

3. Do you think government spending on aid and development ...

Should increase	3	2	4	0	9 (11%)
Should stay the same	12	10	10	13	45 (57%)
Should decrease	4	8	6	4	22 (28%)
Should stop entirely	1	0	0	2	3 (4%)

4. How important is it for the UK government to maintain its commitment to international development?

Very important	4	6	2	0	12 (15%)
Quite important	14	11	13	13	51 (70%)
Not important	1	0	1	4	6 (8%)
Unsure	1	3	4	2	10 (8%)

Have you ever donated to a charity that works in the developing world (e.g. Oxfam or Christian Aid)?

Yes	15	19	19	18	71 (90%)
No	5	1	1	1	8 (10%)

How often do you donate to this kind of charity?

On a regular basis	5	4	4	5	18 (25%)
In response to specific appeals	11	15	16	13	55 (75%)



IPPR, the Institute for Public Policy Research, is the UK's leading progressive thinktank. We produce rigorous research and innovative policy ideas for a fair, democratic and sustainable world. We are open and independent in how we work, and with offices in London and the North of England, IPPR spans a full range of local and national policy debates. Our international partnerships extend IPPR's influence and reputation across the world.

ODI is the UK's leading independent think tank on international development and humanitarian issues. Our mission is to inspire and inform policy and practice which lead to the reduction of poverty, the alleviation of suffering and the achievement of sustainable livelihoods. We do this by locking together high-quality applied research, practical policy advice and policy-focused dissemination and debate. We work with partners in the public and private sectors, in both developing and developed countries.



ISBN 978-1-907288-78-4

Design: www.stevendickie.com/design

© Institute for Public Policy Research & Overseas Development Institute, June 2012

Readers are encouraged to quote or reproduce material from this report for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. As copyright holder, IPPR & ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. The views presented in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of IPPR & ODI.